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SUBJECT: TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO: SERIOUS PUBLIC CONCERN ABOUT
CRIME

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11. (SBU) Summary: With Christmas and the February 2008 Carnival season approaching, Trinidad and Tobago is gripped by fear of crime, which, fueled by media frenzy, is perceived as out of control. Many complain that the GOTT is powerless to do anything, or is unconcerned, criticizing the performance of recently re-appointed National Security Minister Martin Joseph and Police Commissioner Trevor Paul, who has been kept on for want of a replacement. Although the GOTT is taking steps to reform its police force and institute community policing, public confidence in the police is lacking. The roots of crime include the influx of drugs and weapons from South America, income disparities, a breakdown of traditional values, deficiencies in the judicial system, and a general culture of lawlessness reflected in a lack of basic civic consciousness. The U.S. and other foreign governments assist the GOTT with training, expertise, and technical assistance, but absent a wholesale transformation of society and a revamping of the police, prosecution, judiciary, and prison system, as well as an effective system of protecting witnesses, the situation is not likely to improve soon. End Summary.

Latest Statistics -----

12. (U) As of December 19, 2007, there had been 371 homicides during the year, of which 195 were deemed to be gang-related, and 12 kidnappings for ransom. Statistics comparing various crimes from the period from January 1 through December 3 of 2006 and the same period in 2007 are as follows:

	2006	2007	Percentage Change
Kidnapping	175	155	-11
Kidnapping for ransom	14	12	-14
Robberies	5097	4381	-14
Wounding and shooting	604	563	-7
Sexual offenses	800	700	-13
Burglaries and break-ins	4585	4394	-4
Stolen Vehicles	1348	1573	+17

What People Fear

13. (SBU) Although the number of crimes (except homicide) is down slightly, the decrease is not enough to lend credence to claims by the Minister of National Security, Martin Joseph, that the situation is improving. Virtually every day the three major daily newspapers carry a front page story of another grisly murder. The nadir may have been the brutal rape and murder of a 16 year old schoolgirl on her way home from tutoring in November. Her decomposing body was found by searching community members (who saw a flock of vultures) five days later, and the police reportedly dismissed the initial anxious inquiries of her father, telling him she had probably run off with a man.

14. (SBU) There is a perception that, although some places are safer than others, no place is completely safe. Recently 20 bathers at Las Cuevas Beach, a popular destination, were threatened with dogs, a pistol, and a cutlass, and were robbed of their possessions in broad daylight. A woman jogger was raped in early December in Port of Spain near a road well frequented by early morning runners. Businesses are robbed and their owners murdered, and people are raped and killed during home invasions, including in rural areas that were previously free of all but minor crime. Old timers say the situation is the worst they have ever seen. Wealthy East Indians, Syrians and Chinese feel especially vulnerable, and avoid certain areas of Port of Spain entirely. Expatriates also say crime is worse than before, and send warnings to each other by the Internet. Certain foreign companies are attempting to lower their employees' profiles by recalling their company-furnished luxury cars and issuing them more modest vehicles. Although the fear of crime is probably disproportional to the likelihood of becoming a

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victim, the fear by itself is enough to crimp people's sense of security and enjoyment of life.

What the GOTT is Doing

15. (SBU) When it concentrates on a specific area, such as kidnapping for ransom, the GOTT has achieved some success, reducing the number of such kidnappings for ransom from 58 in 2005 to 17 in all of 2006, and 12 so far this year. Part of this has been due to USG involvement in a high-profile case involving the kidnap and murder of an American citizen; criminals are reluctant to risk the relentless and dogged pursuit that is likely when the USG gets on a case. Overall, fewer than 20 percent of all homicides are ever solved. The solution rate for kidnappings, 45 percent, is better.

16. (U) Under the tutelage of Professor Stephen Mastrofski of George Mason University, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) has initiated a series of reforms, including promotions based on merit rather than seniority, purchasing more vehicles, and building five modern model "community police" stations. Thirty-nine retired investigators from Scotland Yard are providing advice and assistance to the Special Anti-Crime Unit of Trinidad and Tobago (SAUTT). However, concomitant modernization is required in the judiciary, which suffers from a backlog of cases, the prosecution, which often loses cases (many of which are presented by TTPS officers acting as prosecutors), and the prison system, which is overburdened and under funded. Although the Commissioner of Prisons claims to have a "restorative justice" program that, according to him, has reduced the rate of recidivism substantially, some critics still maintain that the prison system concentrates more on incarceration than on rehabilitation.

17. (SBU) The GOTT has also created the Special Anti-Crime Unit of Trinidad and Tobago (SAUTT), but this mixture of police and military does not yet have a clearly defined mission or a legal basis on which to operate, and its

creation is said to have negatively affected the morale of the TTPS, because members of SAUTT are paid more and have better equipment and weapons. In addition, the GOTT has purchased a blimp with cameras and radar that periodically drones over the city, although this "Eye in the Sky" is widely derided as an expensive but ultimately useless toy. (Note: It may be more effective at detecting illegal maritime traffic than deterring common crime; the GOTT has had some success in interdicting shipments of narcotics.)

Public's Opinion of GOTT Efforts

¶18. (SBU) The most charitable view the public takes is that the GOTT sincerely wants to deal with the issue of crime but is clueless about how to proceed. Another more cynical view is that, having won the recent elections and thus being assured of five more years in power, the current administration, headed by the People's National Movement, simply does not care. There has been widespread criticism of the re-appointment of Martin Joseph as Minister of National Security. Joseph was recently ridiculed in the press for stating in a speech that fighting crime was more difficult than he had originally thought it would be, although the same critics often suggest that crime reduction is a simple matter. There has also been grumbling about the retention of Trevor Paul, who was asked to stay on after his retirement as Commissioner of Police, because a suitable replacement has not yet been found. There is a common consensus that some police officers are corrupt, and that the police are, by and large, rarely present when and where needed, are not to be trusted, and are of little help in assisting victims of crime or investigating and solving crimes.

Roots of the Crime Problem

¶19. (SBU) Older citizens of T and T say that when they were children, standards were higher, schools were better, parents were stricter, and the entire community kept an eye on young people. While people have been saying this for thousands of years, this does not mean that their comments in this case are mistaken. However, the roots of T and T's crime problem are far deeper than this.

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¶10. (SBU) T and T is only a few miles from Venezuela, and is a prime transshipment point for illegal narcotics. Those who handle the drugs are paid in a combination of drugs, cash, and weapons, so the country is awash in illegal firearms, including semiautomatic pistols, shotguns, and assault rifles. More than half of all murders, 195 of 368 as of December 19, have been gang related, as rivals settle scores and compete for business and territory. There is also a great deal of money, due to the gas and oil boom, and a wide disparity between the wealthiest and the poorest (17% of the population still lives below the poverty level), coupled with a desire among some youth to, in the words of rapper 50 Cent, "Get rich or die trying." Contracts for make-work projects under the Unemployment Relief Program (URP) and Community Environmental Protection and Enhancement Program (CEPEP) are a lucrative source of income, with those in charge of a particular project listing "ghost workers" and skimming the payroll, and contractors for these programs are sometimes killed to create a vacancy.

¶11. (SBU) The detection rate for homicide is below 20 percent. Even when someone is arrested and charged, his case is often thrown out because the police officer fails to appear or has not assembled and presented an adequate case. In addition, several key witnesses have been murdered before they could testify, and others have been intimidated into silence, or have disappeared out of fear. There is also an apparent fear by juries of bringing guilty verdicts against certain notorious persons charged with serious crimes such as

kidnapping and murder. The judicial system is clogged with backlogs, and offenders are often released on bail and then commit more crimes. The police are rarely seen patrolling in public and enforcing laws. They are slow to appear when called. Complainants who go to a police station often report that they were treated in a lackadaisical manner. Police morale is low, and they lack modern technology and training (for example, there is no computerized vehicle registration system). Furthermore, many in the community fear the police, who are often accused of using excessive violence, being quick on the draw, and making arbitrary and capricious arrests of innocent persons. In addition, a high ranking officer recently alleged that there was widespread corruption involving drugs and weapons among the TTPS in the south of Trinidad.

¶12. (SBU) Finally, there is a culture of impunity. A columnist recently observed that the GOTT had passed laws against littering, loud music in vehicles, illegal parking, drug use, and domestic violence, none of which were being enforced. Customers in stores routinely jump the line, motorists drink and drive, and barrel down the shoulder of the road to pass a long line of bumper to bumper traffic, then force their way back in, passengers toss garbage out of car windows, drivers stop suddenly at will and block an entire lane of traffic, and pedestrians sprint across a busy highway within sight of a pedestrian overpass or a crosswalk with signals. As a minister at the funeral of a young farmer shot and killed by bandits while trying to protect his family said, when people disobey minor laws and nothing happens, they realize they can violate virtually any law with impunity.

How the US is Helping GOTT Combat Crime

¶13. (SBU) Regardless of the overall lack of civic consciousness, inefficiency and corruption in the police, and the perceived fecklessness of the Minister of National Security and the Commissioner of Police, there are a number of honest police who want to protect and serve the community.

The International Narcotics and Law Enforcement program (INL) provides equipment and training to law enforcement agencies, and the office of the Legal Attaché works with the GOTT to investigate and prosecute crimes involving American citizens. The Drug Enforcement Agency works to indict and extradite drug traffickers with a proven connection to crimes with a link to the United States. The Bureau of Diplomatic Security also provides a number of anti-terrorism training programs to GOTT law enforcement personnel.

¶14. (SBU) There is also a long-term program underway to transform the operating procedures of the TTPS, as noted in paragraph 6. Regardless of how much the police improve their methodology and technology, the overall situation is not likely to improve soon; the public must learn to take an

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active role in fighting crime, and must also learn to trust and work with the police again. In addition, following the classic "broken window" theory, people must be fined or otherwise sanctioned for breaking small laws before they become emboldened to commit more serious crimes.

Hope at Last?

¶15. (SBU) Comment: History contains examples of countries that have gradually developed a more orderly and disciplined way of life, and have eventually turned themselves around. If improvements in the police force can be combined with reform of the judicial and prison system, the passage and enforcement of new laws (such as DNA identification and the use of wiretaps), and a gradual shift in societal attitudes, the current situation may eventually be improved. However, it is likely to be a long and uphill battle. End Comment.

